Characters

CHIKAMATSU	Playwright, about 50.
NORITOSHI	A masterless samurai. Unshaven, tough-looking. In mid-twenties.
STRANGER	Handsome samurai. (Same actor plays JOBEI)
ASAKO	Angelic face. Kabuki makeup. Princess/courtesan.
INO	An old, ugly, decrepit woman; in reality an ogre.
JOBEI	Good-looking, hero-like in appearance. But a villain.
NIKU	Messenger. (Same actor also plays FUJO)
YASAI	Messenger. (Same actor also plays YAKI)
FUJO	Filthy thug. Couple of teeth missing.
YAKI	Equally dirty thug. Scarred face.
NATSUKIYA	Smut merchant. (Same actor also plays INO)

THE YEAR: 1704.

THE SETTING:

Evening in a dark, realistic forest. A bare tree stands upstage left on a higher level. Large boulder is at midstage right. Upstage center is a fire pit.

Downstage center is a clear area. A hanamichi (walkway used in Kabuki plays) is at stage right and extends into the audience. (Optional: Hanamichi can come from upstage right to downstage right.)

Also optional: The use of a Kuroko (stage assistant in Kabuki, dressed in black with black hood) to help actors with props or with dressing.

Act 1

ACT I

Chikamatsu enters from left carrying a few twigs, which he puts into the fire pit, then warms his hands. He steps in front of the pit and sticks his rear end out, then shivers involuntarily. He chuckles.

A crow caws. Chikamatsu looks about, surveying the dark forest. He goes to a bundle in a basket and takes out a woman puppet (in Bunraku style). He puts the puppet in front of him.

CHIKAMATSU

(Speaking like a woman)

No, no, please. I don't want to be his concubine. Please, father, don't be so cruel.

(Speaking in a male voice, holding puppet at arm's length)

Now, now, be sensible. You are young and lovely. Lord Higashi told me you would be his favorite. His present wife bores him.

(As a woman)

I . . . I would run away.

(Moves in manner of woman with the puppet)

I would kill myself.

(As a man)

What? Suicide? Silly girl. What would that accomplish? My way we both prosper.

(As a woman)

Horrible. What will happen to me? Someone please help me . . . help mmmmeeee.

Crow caws. Chikamatsu stops, listens. He quickly puts the puppet away and hides by the tree.

Noritoshi enters, looking grubby and hungry. He doesn't see Chikamatsu. Instead, he proceeds downstage slowly. Then he stops, draws his sword, eyeing something on the ground. Suddenly he lunges forward with his sword and misses. He turns, looks, chases. After a moment, he stops and grunts disgustedly. Putting his sword away, he goes to the fire pit, looks about and sees no one. Then he goes to the boulder and facing upstage acts as if he's going to urinate.

CHIKAMATSU

Oi! Oi!

Startled, Noritoshi jumps around, acting as if he wet his pants a little.

Scared you, eh? I didn't mean to.

NORITOSHI

You didn't scare me. But can't a man have some privacy in the forest?

CHIKAMATSU

Sorry.

NORITOSHI

I had to choke it off, nearly came up my throat.

CHIKAMATSU

I don't think that can happen. Physically, I mean.

NORITOSHI

You questioning the way my body functions?

CHIKAMATSU

Don't get angry. It's just that you were going to urinate where I intended to sleep tonight.

NORITOSHI

So? Does it say "Reserved for Sleeping" around here?

CHIKAMATSU

No.

NORITOSHI

You think animals in the forest care where they do it?

CHIKAMATSU

No.

NORITOSHI

All right then. I'll do it wherever I want to do it and whenever I want to do it.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, I understand. Please, go ahead.

NORITOSHI

I can't.

CHIKAMATSU

Ah, sorry, I won't look.

NORITOSHI

It's not that. Like I said, it's up to here now.

(Motions chest high)

It'll take a while for it to come out the other end. No use going now.

CHIKAMATSU

In that case, would you like to share my fire?

NORITOSHI

I don't share fires with strangers.

CHIKAMATSU

You must be hungry. I have only one riceball left. But you can have it. I saw you were trying to catch the mouse.

NORITOSHI

Mouse? What mouse? That was a rabbit. What's wrong with your eyes? I don't eat mouse.

CHIKAMATSU

Sorry. Please have the rice.

Chikamatsu offers the riceball.

NORITOSHI

A little rice can't hurt, I guess.

Noritoshi bites into riceball and screws up his face as he chews.

Dry, eh.

CHIKAMATSU

It's from this morning. I'm sorry.

NORITOSHI

Don't apologize. I'm used to it.

CHIKAMATSU

Where are you headed?

NORITOSHI

Kyoto.

CHIKAMATSU

Too bad. I'm traveling to Osaka.

NORITOSHI

So we're going in opposite directions. Good luck to you.

CHIKAMATSU

If you were going to Osaka, we could travel together.

NORITOSHI

I don't travel with strangers.

CHIKAMATSU

We don't have to be. My name is Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

A blank look on Noritoshi's face.

You've heard of me?

NORITOSHI

Chikamatsu Monzaemon? No.

CHIKAMATSU

I write plays. Puppet plays. We stage them at the Takemoto Theater in Osaka.

NORITOSHI

So?

CHIKAMATSU

Nothing really. What do you do?

NORITOSHI

Me? I go from city to city looking for work.

CHIKAMATSU

What kind of work?

NORITOSHI

The kind where this baby does the talking.

(Grabs his sword)

CHIKAMATSU

You kill people?

NORITOSHI

Nah. I just scare 'em. See this face of mine? I just smile

(bares his teeth and lets out a loud growl)

and everybody takes one step back.

Chikamatsu takes one step back.

You don't believe me?

CHIKAMATSU

Looks like people who hire you don't pay you.

NORITOSHI

Well, I don't ask for much. Just enough to feed my face. You make a lot of money writing for puppets?

CHIKAMATSU

Why do you want to know?

NORITOSHI

Oh nothing. Just trying to be . . . friendly.

CHIKAMATSU

I used to write plays for Kabuki, but I got fed up with the actors.

NORITOSHI

That so?

CHIKAMATSU

Yes. What egos they have. What vanities. They think writers are their servants. They change my lines, write in their own dialogue, do their own interpretation of my characters that make no sense in the context of the story.

NORITOSHI

That's bad?

CHIKAMATSU

Of course. All Kabuki actors are alike. Like that Ichikawa Danjuro in Edo. Pompous idiot. He says, during a play yet, "I am Danjuro, watch me reach the highest peak of excellence, thrill to my magnificent strength and grace." He's a horse's ass.

NORITOSHI

Danjuro? I saw him. He's good.

CHIKAMATSU

Good? What do you know, a broken-down tramp like you.

NORITOSHI

Huh?

CHIKAMATSU

Come on now, don't lie and say you're a samurai. Where did you get the sword? That doesn't belong to you, admit it.

Noritoshi grasps his long sword.

NORITOSHI

It's a beauty, eh. I took it from a dead samurai warrior on a battlefield. I was only six years old. First, I thought he was alive, 'cause his eyes were open. His mouth too. It looked like he was crying for help. A silent scream. I talked to him. I said, "Are you all right?" But it was like talking to a . . . puppet. He had no life in him, and I had no power to bring him back from the dead.

CHIKAMATSU

What battle was this?

NORITOSHI

Oh I don't remember. All the battles are the same. Bodies scattered and twisted on the ground, human scavengers moving about without a sound, like shadows in the moonlight. Everything's quiet, so quiet that it becomes eerie and unnatural, especially at night-like now.

Crow caws. Chikamatsu is startled and spooked.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, yes, you're right about puppets. Without me, they're nothing. I give them life. In my plays, I create characters, kill them off, then bring them back to life, if I want. Wait.

Chikamatsu brings out his puppet.

See. I'm taking her to Osaka to use at the Takemoto. Isn't she a beauty?

NORITOSHI

It's only a doll.

CHIKAMATSU

She's a woman of many personalities. She is what I want her to be. With puppets, there is no argument, no ego to battle over interpretation. The perfect actor.

NORITOSHI

No, I disagree.

CHIKAMATSU

You disagree? Who are you? What do you know? You probably never saw a puppet play in your life.

NORITOSHI

But I saw Danjuro. And I know nothing can surpass the energy and fire of a live actor on stage, burning with passion, raging at the world with his wounded soul.

CHIKAMATSU

What are you, an out-of-work actor?

NORITOSHI

Don't be stupid. I'm a tramp, you said so yourself. A tramp with a beautiful sword.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, but why are you a tramp, a good-for-nothing? A woman. Of course. A woman of refinement.

Chikamatsu holds the puppet out.

(As a woman)

My, you are a filthy animal, aren't you . . . ah . . .

He pokes his head out from behind the puppet.

What's your name?

NORITOSHI

Name?

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, yes, quick. Name.

NORITOSHI

Noritoshi.

CHIKAMATSU

Noritoshi?

(To puppet)

Hmm, good name.

He goes behind the puppet again.

(As a woman)

My, Noritoshi, don't you ever take a bath? How can you make love to a woman when you smell like a pickled turnip?

Noritoshi says nothing. Chikamatsu pokes his head out.

Well, aren't you going to answer?

NORITOSHI

I don't talk to puppets.

CHIKAMATSU

Where's your spirit of fun? So it is a woman, eh? It's always a woman. I was right. I'm not a writer for nothing. She was a lady of nobility. You a lowly peasant. But she had her eye on you. And she said:

Lights dim except for spotlight on Noritoshi and puppet.

(As a woman)

Noritoshi, do you find me desirable? Speak, please.

NORITOSHI

My lady, I wish to serve you in any way I can.

CHIKAMATSU

(As a woman)

My, what a lovely thing to say. I want the pleasure of your body against mine.

NORITOSHI

Please, my lady, anything but that.

CHIKAMATSU

(As a woman)

What?

NORITOSHI

It wouldn't be right.

CHIKAMATSU

(As a woman)

Don't mock me.

NORITOSHI

I would give you my life but--

CHIKAMATSU

(As a woman)

You're not a man, after all. A woman, that's what you are. I was a fool to even consider you as a lover.

NORITOSHI

Don't be angry. I'm sorry if I displease you.

Chikamatsu makes the puppet tremble and shake with anger.

CHIKAMATSU

(As a woman)

Insect! You're an insect, a crawling, unclean, tiny bug living under rocks and in weeds. Something to be stepped on and squashed. Crawl, insect, run for your life. See how far you can go. Run, run to the edge of the world. Run till you fall off into Hell.

The puppet reacts crazily, shaking with a frenzy, at the same time laughing maniacally. Then the lights slowly come up, and Chikamatsu puts the puppet at his side. Noritoshi is now seated on the ground.

NORITOSHI

Satisfied?

CHIKAMATSU

I was close perhaps?

NORITOSHI

Nowhere near.

CHIKAMATSU

But it was a woman?

NORITOSHI

What difference does it make? A failure is a failure, no excuses.

CHIKAMATSU

What did you fail at?

NORITOSHI

I'm going now.

CHIKAMATSU

Look, how about accompanying me to Osaka?

NORITOSHI

What for?

CHIKAMATSU

I'll pay you.

NORITOSHI

No thanks.

CHIKAMATSU

I need a guard, someone to protect me against bandits.

NORITOSHI

You should've thought of that before starting on your trip.

Noritoshi walks on the hanamichi.

Take care, writer of puppet plays. I'm off to Kyoto, maybe my luck will change there. Different city, different

people. Who knows what adventures I'll find. Keep moving. Never overstay your welcome. A departing guest is the best guest of all.

CHIKAMATSU

Goodbye, Noritoshi. Maybe we'll meet again.

NORITOSHI

I doubt it. I don't like to meet the same people twice.

CHIKAMATSU

Remember me the next time. Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

NORITOSHI

If ever I fall in love with a puppet, I'll come and ask your advice.

CHIKAMATSU

Don't be a tramp all your life.

NORITOSHI

Don't worry about me. I have no money. I have no clothes other than what I wear. I have no honor. But I'll survive somehow.

CHIKAMATSU

Spoken like a true tramp.

NORITOSHI

I don't believe in suicide. I cling to life on the mountain of adversity.

Noritoshi is about to exit.

CHIKAMATSU

Farewell, strange one. I hoped you would be friendlier, but I'll drink a toast to you anyway with the sake I have with me and get drunk by the fire.

Chikamatsu goes to his bundle. Noritoshi stops, then suddenly turns and races back on the hanamichi.

NORITOSHI

Did you say sake?

CHIKAMATSU

Huh?

NORITOSHI

You have sake with you?

CHIKAMATSU

I thought you were gone.

NORITOSHI

What kind of gentleman are you not to offer a fellow traveler a drink? What did your mother raise anyway, a rude, selfish writer of puppet plays?

CHIKAMATSU

I didn't know you drank.

NORITOSHI

Drink? I can drink a sea of sake. I can have waves of sake rolling in my stomach, and I still feel like I'm drifting lazily on a lake of pleasant disposition.

Noritoshi squats next to Chikamatsu, waiting, a smile on his lips.

CHIKAMATSU

I have no cup to offer you.

NORITOSHI

I trust your germs. I know they won't harm me.

Noritoshi takes the jug and gulps a drink.

Aaahhh, fine sake. Puppets must be good to you.

CHIKAMATSU

You surprised me by coming back.

NORITOSHI

Never underestimate the power of . . . sake. What's the matter? First, you ask me to travel with you, now you act as if I'm an intruder.

CHIKAMATSU

No, no, it's not that. But you're so unpredictable.

NORITOSHI

I toss in the wind and fly this way and that way. I float on a breeze of good fortune one day, then tumble along in a hurricane of bad luck the next. Feel a little pity for me, old friend. You should be happy I came back.

Noritoshi keeps drinking as he goes downstage right and sits.

CHIKAMATSU

Except that I don't really need you now.

NORITOSHI

Sure you do. I'll go to Osaka with you. Just give me a little food and sake money, and I'll be happy.

CHIKAMATSU

All right, but--

NIKU

(OFFSTAGE)

Chi--kaaaa---maaa---tsuuuu!

Chikamatsu stops, listens. Niku enters from upstage left. He walks somewhat like a chicken, bobbing up and down, like bowing and walking at the same time.

NIKU

Chikamatsu. At last we found you.

CHIKAMATSU

Niku, what're you doing here?

NIKU

Please, the sensei wants you to come back. Isn't that . . .

(looking back)

isn't . . . Yasai, hurry up.

Yasai scurries in with little steps but not in a straight line. He weaves cautiously as if expecting to be pounced upon any second.

YASAI

Is it safe out here?

NIKU

Never mind that. Doesn't the sensei want Chikamatsu back?

YASAI

That's right. Hello, Chikamatsu. We've been looking all over Japan for you.

NIKU

The sensei said not to come back until we found you.

CHIKAMATSU

It's no secret where I've been.

YASAI

That's what you think. We haven't been home in years searching for you.

CHIKAMATSU

Years? Don't get funny.

NIKU

It's true. It's been hell. We see you go over a hill and we rush over, but you disappear.

YASAI

We spot you at a theater and run to catch you. But you're gone.

NIKU

We yell at you, we scream, "Chikamatsu, wait, all is forgiven."

YASAI

And sometimes, I swear you're looking right at us, but you don't see us.

NIKU

Or pretend you don't see us.

YASAI

You're bad, Chikamatsu.

CHIKAMATSU

I'm sorry you wasted so many years looking for me, but I told the sensei how I felt when I left.

YASAI

Yes, we know that. We were there, remember?

CHIKAMATSU

You were? No, it was just the sensei and me.

NIKU

No, we heard everything. We were standing right behind you.

CHIKAMATSU

I know you weren't there. I remember. Just the sensei and me.

NIKU

But we heard the sensei tell you that you would be wasting your talent with puppets that have no heart.

YASAI

He said you belonged to Kabuki. Isn't that right?

CHIKAMATSU

Yes.

NIKU

See.

YASAI

People are laughing at you in Kyoto.

Yasai and Niku begin laughing tauntingly.

They say writing for puppets is so foolish when you have great Kabuki actors to work for.

NIKU

The sensei forgives you.

CHIKAMATSU

Forgives me? He's crazy.

YASAI

That's not nice, Chikamatsu.

NIKU

Your puppet plays . . . they lack spirit. It's meaningless garbage.

CHIKAMATSU

You dirty--

He is ready to strike Niku.

NIKU

No, no, wait. I didn't say that. The sensei did. The sensei. You know he always says unkind things like that. I thought your plays were . . . interesting.

CHIKAMATSU

Tell the sensei I'll never go back to Kabuki. Never.

YASAI

But we're thinking of posterity. People will say you weren't good enough to write for Kabuki.

NIKU

Do you want that?

CHIKAMATSU

Go back where you came from, wherever that is. I don't want to see either of you again. You're gone, out of my sight. Forever.

YASAI

Don't be that way.

NIKU

What did we ever do to you?

Niku and Yasai slowly retreat backward upstage left.

YASAI

We were only trying to help.

NIKU

Do you know how to get back?

YASAI

No, I was hoping you did.

NIKU

It'll probably be years before we reach our destination.

YASAI

Bye, Chikamatsu.

NIKU

Since you don't want us, you'll never see us again.

Niku and Yasai drift backward into the shadows and are gone. Noritoshi has been sitting facing downstage all this time. He rises, slightly drunk.

NORITOSHI

Ah, Chikamatsu.

CHIKAMATSU

Do you believe those idiots?

NORITOSHI

You know what I was thinking?

He returns empty jug to Chikamatsu.

CHIKAMATSU

No, no, those two.

NORITOSHI

What two?

CHIKAMATSU

The ones I was talking with.

NORITOSHI

I didn't hear anyone.

CHIKAMATSU

You must have. They were here.

NORITOSHI

Well, I heard you talking to yourself but I thought--

CHIKAMATSU

I don't talk to myself.

NORITOSHI

You talk to puppets. Do they hear? Do they answer?

CHIKAMATSU

That's different. These guys were real. They . . . never mind.

NORITOSHI

Tell me. When you write plays, do you take them from real life?

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, mostly.

NORITOSHI

You don't make it up?

CHIKAMATSU

Well, you change things around for dramatic effect, but generally I take my stories from events happening around me.

NORITOSHI

And your heroes. They're strong, good fighters--samurai?

CHIKAMATSU

Some are samurai. Some are just commoners who become heroes. It depends on the story. Sometimes I have commoners triumph over samurai.

NORITOSHI

Yeah? You have something against samurai?

CHIKAMATSU

No. I just feel commoners should have their own heroes. Why should they always have to look up to samurai?

NORITOSHI

Times change, I guess. Who would've thought commoners could be heroes?

CHIKAMATSU

I also write tear-jerkers. They're always popular with the masses.

NORITOSHI

A good cry, sure. But Danjuro. I saw him in Edo. He played a superhuman character, a lot of violence and action.

CHIKAMATSU

That's Edo theater. Rough-house style. Not for me.

NORITOSHI

Could I be a hero in one of your plays?

CHIKAMATSU

You? Don't ask for miracles.

NORITOSHI

Why not? I don't have the right look?

CHIKAMATSU

It's your personality. How you talk, how you act, not very hero-like.

Stranger stomps onto hanamichi. He proceeds toward the stage.

NORITOSHI

You make heroes out of commoners.

CHIKAMATSU

But my commoners have a certain dignity. A noble cause or purpose. Sorry to say, you don't qualify.

Stranger is now upon them.

STRANGER

Excuse me.

Noritoshi jumps away and grasps his sword.

I don't mean to bother, but is this the way to Osaka? I've been traveling a long time. I don't know how long, but I need some rest. I hope you don't mind if I bed down here tonight.

Chikamatsu bows and motions him welcome. Stranger is wearing the same outfit as Noritoshi, except that his is clean and new. Noritoshi takes Chikamatsu aside. Stranger walks to stage left area and stands very hero-like.

NORITOSHI

Notice something funny about him?

CHIKAMATSU

No, he's a handsome man.

NORITOSHI

I don't mean that. His clothes.

CHIKAMATSU

Oh, well, that. It appears you two went to the same tailor. Only his is clean and new, and yours look like they came from a pile of horse manure.

NORITOSHI

You think he sort of resembles me?

CHIKAMATSU

Impossible. No, no, it's just the clothes. He's clean-cut, neat, good-looking. And you're . . . well . . . He's also more polite. Anyway, who cares? He seems harmless enough.

NORITOSHI

I don't like the fact that he's dressed like me.

CHIKAMATSU

A small matter. It would be different if you two were going to the same party.

NORITOSHI

There's only one of me ever. This guy is an embarrassing imitation.

CHIKAMATSU

Don't make a fuss.

Noritoshi straightens himself up first, then goes to Stranger but stops at a safe distance.

NORITOSHI

Hey you. What kind of question is that--is this the way to Osaka? Any dummy would know the right direction.

STRANGER

I don't know. I truly don't.

NORITOSHI

Who's your tailor?

STRANGER

My tailor? I don't remember.

NORITOSHI

How come you're dressed the way you are?

STRANGER

Is there a problem?

NORITOSHI

Your sword, it looks like--

STRANGER

Yes, it was given to me when I was a boy by a samurai warrior dying on a battlefield. He wanted to leave me with something for aiding him in his last moments on Earth.

NORITOSHI

You hear that, Chikamatsu? A phony story, right?

CHIKAMATSU

(To Stranger)

Don't pay attention to him. He's a bit weird.

NORITOSHI

Me weird? You're weird. He's weird. This forest is weird. I'm the only sane one around here. You, what's your name?

STRANGER

Why do you want to know?

NORITOSHI

Come on, let's hear it.

STRANGER

Why, it's . . . it's . . . what is my name?

NORITOSHI

You don't know your name? Where were you born?

STRANGER

I was born in . . . I was born . . .

NORITOSHI

What year?

STRANGER

The year?

NORITOSHI

What's your mother's maiden name?

STRANGER

Wait, wait, I'm trying to think. I apologize for being so hesitant but...my name, I think I know now. It's No...No...ah, ah, I need help. I --

CHIKAMATSU

Did you bump your head recently? Sometimes that causes you to forget everything -temporarily.

NORITOSHI

Don't give him any excuses. Why is he dressed like me? And his sword --

CHIKAMATSU

So you had the same sword maker.

STRANGER

All I know is that I wanted to get to Osaka

NORITOSHI

Why?

STRANGER

I don't know.

CHIKAMATSU

Wait. We can go together. Noritoshi, you continue on to Kyoto.

NORITOSHI

I was here first. I'm going to Osaka with you.

CHIKAMATSU

But you didn't want to go. You have no business there.

NORITOSHI

I made up my mind. You, whatever your name is, you go to Kyoto instead. Lots of beautiful women there. Make love to them and tell them Noritoshi sent you. They would love an empty head like you.

STRANGER

Nori . . . to . . . shi? Why, that's my--

CHIKAMATSU

(To Stranger)

You'd better go. You look like a poet to me. Your features, I mean. Yes, yes, you have the delicacy of a sensitive poet. I know, you were going to Edo to find Ransetsu, the disciple of Basho, the famous haiku poet. Ah, too bad Basho is dead. I could've introduced you to him.

(To Noritoshi)

He was a samurai by birth, you know.

(To Stranger)

You can become a pupil of Ransetsu and learn to write five-seven-five haiku.

STRANGER

Yes, I would like to meet him.

CHIKAMATSU

Good, good. I'm not much on haiku myself. I need the tapestry of a play to put forth my ideas and emotions. Haiku is so short and so loved. Makes you wonder. Probably took Basho a minute to write a haiku. To write a play, I take at least five days. Six days, if I'm drunk.

NORITOSHI

All right then, you go to Edo.

STRANGER

But who am I? I don't know my name.

NORITOSHI

Tough riceballs.

CHIKAMATSU

I have a name you can use. Shichi. Call yourself Shichi. Go, Shichi, go. Find Ransetsu and write haiku.

STRANGER

Thank you. Very much. I'll try my best.

NORITOSHI

Yeah, yeah, you won't let us down, on your honor, we know.

STRANGER

Till we meet again.

Stranger bows and exits upstage left as Chikamatsu points the way.

NORITOSHI

You meet some real cuckoos in the forest.

CHIKAMATSU

He'll be all right.

NORITOSHI

Sure. A pretty face like his will always get by.

CHIKAMATSU

Well, if you're going with me to Osaka, we'd better get some sleep.

NORITOSHI

But first I have to relieve myself.

He starts to go to earlier spot.

CHIKAMATSU

Can you do it off . . . that way?

Chikamatsu points offstage left.

NORITOSHI

Of course. What do you think I am, a stupid dog?

Noritoshi goes off left. Chikamatsu prepares to bed down near the boulder.

CHIKAMATSU

The forest in my head sings, Magic in the night. Thoughts of fancy find their wings, Vanish in mid-flight.

Asako and Ino enter from stage right hanamichi. Chikamatsu reclines in sleep. Asako is dressed in a colorful kimono and wears Kabuki makeup. Ino is old, ugly and hunched over, uses a crooked staff for support.

ASAKO

I am so tired.

INO

We'll rest. But we must be careful.

ASAKO

I don't want to go back. If we get caught, you must promise to kill me.

INO

Sweet Asako. You will be safe. Trust me. Come.

They continue on the hanamichi and see Chikamatsu on the ground. Ino motions for Asako to be quiet. Ino creeps up to Chikamatsu and sniffs him from head to toe.

Noritoshi enters from left, stops when he sees Asako and Ino. Ino takes out a knife and raises it high above Chikamatsu.

NORITOSHI

Chikamatsu, look out!

Chikamatsu rolls out of danger as Ino plunges the knife down. At the same time Asako screams and tries to run away, but Noritoshi grabs her by the arm.

INO

Oh please, don't harm her. It's a mistake. I'm only an old woman. We're helpless without men. Please, we beg you, please.

NORITOSHI

Drop the knife.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, old women like you shouldn't play with knives. You could hurt somebody.

Ino puts the knife down and Chikamatsu picks it up.

INO

I'm sorry. Now that I see you, I know there is no danger. You aren't the ones we're escaping from.

NORITOSHI

(To Chikamatsu)

If I had taken 30 seconds longer, you would've been a dish of raw meat.

CHIKAMATSU

That's a relief. I guess I should thank you, Nori. May I call you Nori?

NORITOSHI

No.

(To Asako)

My name is Noritoshi.

INO

Her name is Asako. Princess Asako.

CHIKAMATSU

A princess? And who are you?

INO

Her loyal companion, Ino.

NORITOSHI

Just you two? A princess traveling with only a hunchbacked, wrinkled, old crow of a woman?

INO

(Cackling)

Oh don't flatter me, handsome one. You might give me ideas.

NORITOSHI

I can hardly wait. So what's your story?

INO

We're running from Natsukiya, the rich salt merchant. He captured us and hoped to keep the princess as his personal plaything.

NORITOSHI

He's got good taste.

CHIKAMATSU

Don't you have anyone to help you?

INO

We're alone. That's the burden we women face. To be used as sexual toys.

NORITOSHI

That's one problem you don't have to worry about.

CHIKAMATSU

Come on now, be nice.

NORITOSHI

Princess Asako, can you speak? Are you deaf?

ASAKO

No. And I'm not dumb either.

NORITOSHI

Oh good. For a moment, I thought you were a puppet.

CHIKAMATSU

Princess, we'll help you.

NORITOSHI

Wait. Any money in this?

INO

Enough to make you comfortable the rest of your life. However long it may be.

NORITOSHI

I need a lot to feel comfortable.

CHIKAMATSU

Don't be so mercenary, makes you look cheap.

NORITOSHI

If cheap means being rich, I'm all for it.

CHIKAMATSU

Shape up. This is your chance to do something decent.

NORITOSHI

Hey, life is tough enough without trying to be a hero.

ASAKO

Please. If we can just rest a while. Then we'll go. We won't trouble you.

CHIKAMATSU

You must be cold, please warm yourself by the fire.

ASAKO

Thank you.

She goes to the pit.

CHIKAMATSU

You too, Ino. Don't mind him.

INO

No, I'm fine. I like the coldness.

Ino moves downstage and squats facing the audience.

NORITOSHI

Watch out for her. There's something in her eyes I don't like.

CHIKAMATSU

Be serious. She's a harmless old woman, half scared to death. I want to talk to the princess. Coming?

NORITOSHI

I have no use for a princess.

Chikamatsu goes to Asako. Noritoshi to Ino.

How old are you, Ino?

Ino's face, hidden from Noritoshi, turns fiercely wild, revealing teeth and tongue red with blood. But she

answers gently.

INO

As old as the wind.

NORITOSHI

Cute answer--for an old dog like you.

INO

And you are a fine-looking samurai.

NORITOSHI

I'm no samurai.

INO

You don't fool me. I see beyond the tattered clothes, the unshaven face, the cynical attitude.

NORITOSHI

I'm the son of a poor farmer. I got my sword from--

INO

Horibe Yasubei.

Noritoshi takes two steps back.

NORITOSHI

Who?

INO

Horibe, an expert swordsman from the disgraced Asano clan.

NORITOSHI

Never heard of him.

INO

You deny him once. You deny him twice. I'm proud of you.

Ino brings her hands in front of her, twisted, gnarled, angry hands ready to strangle. Her look is devilish and sinister. Noritoshi is standing behind her. He puts his hand to his sword. Chikamatsu comes forward.

CHIKAMATSU

Noritoshi, listen to this. The people after them are real killers. We'd better go too, you know, to protect them.

NORITOSHI

They can protect themselves.

CHIKAMATSU

Be sensible. An old woman and a beautiful princess attacked by a pack of human wolves? I'd hate to think what they would do to the princess if they--

NORITOSHI

You have a sword?

CHIKAMATSU

No.

NORITOSHI

A gun?

CHIKAMATSU

Of course not.

NORITOSHI

Then how are you going to protect them?

CHIKAMATSU

All right. I mean you have to guard them from danger.

NORITOSHI

No thanks.

CHIKAMATSU

Are you a coward?

Noritoshi grabs Chikamatsu.

NORITOSHI

Be careful, Chikamatsu, Osaka may never see your next play, and the puppets will cry.

CHIKAMATSU

You'd kill me?

NORITOSHI

Not me.

INO

Don't concern yourselves. The princess will be all right. She has me.

CHIKAMATSU

Ino, I admire your optimism, but in a fight the thugs would break you like a dry twig. Now, if they're coming, wouldn't it be better to stay and fight. They wouldn't expect us. We could--you could kill two with a double swish of your sword, and I'll stab the third with the old woman's knife.

NORITOSHI

Who said there were three?

CHIKAMATSU

Oh, I don't know. How many are there?

INO

Three.

CHIKAMATSU

See.

NORITOSHI

Ever killed a man?

CHIKAMATSU

Of course. I've killed a lot of people in my plays.

NORITOSHI

I mean a real man. One who'll scream in pain and fear and cry for mercy before you plunge the knife in. And the blood spurts on your face, warm and alive, staining your lips. You taste it and you love it.

Ino smacks her lips.

CHIKAMATSU

All right, but I can do something else. Set a trap, be a decoy, anything.

(To Ino)

Tell us about this Natsukiya.

INO

An old man feeble in body, but vigorous in greed. As you know too well, merchants have become very powerful. And poor masterless samurai practically beg in the streets.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, it's sad. But this is the age of the common people. That's for sure.

INO

Comfort and pleasure now belong to the masses. Life is too easy, sins of the flesh too much on their minds. But who can blame them? They want what the nobility have always had. And the brothels never close their doors.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, the masses want to be entertained. I know that much. They want to laugh and cry, an emotional release from the centuries of subjugation by feudal lords and samurai.

INO

And the samurai no longer glory in heroic deeds. But you know that, don't you, Noritoshi?

NORITOSHI

It's not my problem.

INO

It is the merchants who prosper, it is the merchants who rule the world now. With Natsukiya, it's salt; with others, it's rice. Money and business now replace agriculture in importance, and the lords in their castles with their acreage are impotent as times change.

CHIKAMATSU

A sad day for samurai too.

NORITOSHI

And commoners are the new heroes.

CHIKAMATSU

What can I say? You write what you see. You give the audience what it wants. But the samurai . . . that reminds me of Basho. What was that haiku he wrote? Something about summer grasses, warriors' dreams, and the sad--

NORITOSHI

Quiet.

CHIKAMATSU

No, no, listen. Basho wept upon seeing wild grasses covering the site of Yoshitsune's last battle.

Crow caws. Noritoshi puts a finger to his own lips. He then crouches on the hanamichi and goes off right.

INO

You are a kind man, dear sir, but he is different.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, I can't help that. He's beyond my control.

ASAKO

Is something wrong?

CHIKAMATSU

No. At least I hope not. He went to check.

INO

The princess has told me to kill her if all is lost. But I must have the knife back.

CHIKAMATSU

You couldn't kill her, a sweet old lady like you.

INO

Oh yes I can. It is easy to kill beauty. That is the nature of humans. Then I will kill myself, for who wants an old woman with no one to care for her. But Death will take me gladly and keep me at Her side, serene and happy.

CHIKAMATSU

And what about me? How will Death take me?

INO

You, she will embrace gently and take you away on a bed of white chrysantemums.

CHIKAMATSU

Sounds good. Make sure I live a full life first.

INO

Please, the knife.

CHIKAMATSU

All right, but don't hurt yourself.

Chikamatsu hands her the knife.

ASAKO

Chikamatsu-sama, can we trust your friend?

CHIKAMATSU

Actually he's not my friend. I just met him tonight.

ASAKO

Then he may be part of the gang.

CHIKAMATSU

I doubt it. He's too ornery to belong to anyone.

ASAKO

Ino, we must go now.

INO

There's nothing to worry about, princess. Chikamatsu-san will protect us.

CHIKAMATSU

I'll try my best. Sometimes words are more effective than swords. If they catch up with us, I'll reason with them.

Ino has her back to the audience, preparing to emerge as the ogre.

I don't have anything for you to eat. Maybe Noritoshi can catch something that I can cook for you. Are you hungry?

Ino turns and she is now an ogre, face grotesque with hate. Asako screams at the sight. Chikamatsu turns and is horrified. Ino, looking fierce and terrifying, lets out a blood-curdling scream. Noritoshi races back on the hanamichi.

INO

Come, come, my dear Noritoshi. See what awaits you now.

Ino goes into a demon dance of much ferocity. As an ogre Ino shows tremendous power and fluidity as he moves to exciting taiko drumming. At the end of the dance Ino strikes a menacing pose over Chikamatsu, who is frozen with fear.

NORITOSHI

You don't need a scared writer for protection. Kill me and let him go.

Noritoshi circles to Asako and grabs her.

Your princess or my writer. What's your choice?

Ino laughs heartily and cynically.

INO

My princess? Yes, wonderful. Kill her. Better than I had planned. Kill! Kill! I was taking her back to be slaughtered in my own little hell. But now I see that she deserves to be killed by someone like you. Go ahead, you have my blessing.

Chikamatsu makes a sudden move to escape.

Die, Chikamatsu!

Ino raises the knife to kill Chikamatsu. Noritoshi draws his sword and runs forward, attacking with a kiai (yell). Ino is distracted as Chikamatsu jumps to safety.

Ino and Noritoshi now circle each other warily. Ino now seizes Asako and puts the knife to her throat. He glares at Noritoshi menacingly. Instead of killing Asako, Ino pushes her to the ground and races to the upstage riser. Ino turns, arms outstretched.

Again, Noritoshi!

Ino jumps off the back of the riser. A puff of smoke rises. There is a long, echoing yell by Ino, first very loud, circling the inside of the theater, then fading into silence.

CHIKAMATSU

That was some crazy old lady.

NORITOSHI

Who was she? Or it?

ASAKO

I don't know. I'm as surprised as you are. I really thought she was an old woman who was trying to help me escape.

CHIKAMATSU

Escape from what?

ASAKO

I . . . I can't say.

NORITOSHI

Someone really chasing you?

ASAKO

Yes, that part is true. It's Natsukiya. Please believe me.

CHIKAMATSU

I believe her.

NORITOSHI

You believe anything.

CHIKAMATSU

That's true. But I have to believe. It's in my nature to believe the stories of unfortunate people.

NORITOSHI

Princess, what are we going to do with you?

ASAKO

I don't know. Everything is so murky, so dark. It's frightening.

CHIKAMATSU

We'll take you any place you want. Home, wherever it is.

ASAKO

No.

CHIKAMATSU

But we can't leave you here.

NORITOSHI

Why not? There's no one after her.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, there is.

NORITOSHI

She didn't tell us everything.

CHIKAMATSU

Of course she did. You told us everything, didn't you?

ASAKO

No.

CHIKAMATSU

Well, she's a princess. She's entitled to some secrets.

NORITOSHI

What about this Natsukiya, this salt merchant?

ASAKO

He kept me in a house in a dark part of the forest. He looked on me as some kind of prize, a treasure to possess. He made me undress in front of him. And he watched me with his mouth open.

NORITOSHI

He must've caught a lot of flies.

CHIKAMATSU

Quiet, let her talk. Please continue, Princess.

ASAKO

He admired my beauty and would stare at me for hours in my nakedness.

CHIKAMATSU

Forgive me for asking, but he touched you?

ASAKO

No. It was almost as if he was afraid I would break if he put his hands on me. But he would come up to me and examine every pore of my skin. He would drool over the creamy whiteness of my neck, the shape of my delicious breasts, the curve of my sensuous hips, the tantalizing triangle of my--

Chikamatsu coughs, embarrassed.

He kept me pure. The only persons he would allow to touch me were two young maidens who bathed me every day. And he always came to watch, mouth always agape.

NORITOSHI

The guy had lockjaw.

CHIKAMATSU

And this Ino, where did she come from?

ASAKO

That was strange. She arrived about a month ago and told me she would help me escape.

CHIKAMATSU

Natsukiya had hired her for something?

ASAKO

To be a cleaning woman.

CHIKAMATSU

I'm positive Ino was some kind of ogre. If so, why did she want you?

ASAKO

I wish I knew. It frightens me to think about it. She was helping me to escape, that's all I cared about.

CHIKAMATSU

Of course.

ASAKO

There's no telling who might be a monster. Even you.

CHIKAMATSU

Me? Oh no, hahaha. A monster? Never. Excuse me, but in all the excitement, I didn't introduce myself properly. Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

He bows. Asako smiles weakly.

The famous playwright?

Asako keeps her frozen smile.

Oh, well.

ASAKO

I was a very isolated princess.

CHIKAMATSU

That would explain it.

NORITOSHI

What is fame, Chikamatsu? Fame is ego. Ego is pride. Pride is self-defeating.

CHIKAMATSU

I don't need moralizing from a lazy tramp.

NORITOSHI

All right then, I'm going to get some sleep.

CHIKAMATSU

Wait. What about the gang that's after the princess?

NORITOSHI

No one's chasing her. She made it all up.

Noritoshi sits near the boulder.

CHIKAMATSU

He's impossible. I'll take you away right now. We don't need him.

ASAKO

Are you sure? Three is better than two, don't you think?

CHIKAMATSU

Oh, if you feel that way, I guess we could stay together.

ASAKO

I know you can protect me by yourself, but you don't have a sword, do you?

CHIKAMATSU

No, that's true.

ASAKO

And he seems to be a rugged man.

CHIKAMATSU

More crude than rugged. A person like him has no class. He abuses you for no good reason.

ASAKO

I don't mind.

CHIKAMATSU

I suppose he's appealing in a different sort of way.

ASAKO

Which is not to say you're not.

CHIKAMATSU

Oh no, I understand. I'm not the virile type.

ASAKO

You are a gentle soul, and gentleness in a man is very much appreciated.

CHIKAMATSU

Spoken like a true princess.

ASAKO

I'm too excited to sleep.

CHIKAMATSU

Come, let's go by the fire.

They warm themselves. Crickets chirp.

Ah, hear the crickets? I love their song. Soothing to me. If crickets are chirping, I know that no intruders are nearby. We can feel safe. When you hear no crickets, that's when there is danger.

The crickets chirp. Chikamatsu begins to doze in a squatting position. It is indeed peaceful. Slowly a fierce-looking head appears upstage left above the riser. He uses his hands to make cricket sounds.

A second menacing head pops up upstage right. The third head, this one handsome, appears stage right near Noritoshi. He nods and the other two join him in climbing onto the stage.

The good-looking one, Jobei, draws his sword and points it at Noritoshi's head. The other two creep up on Chikamatsu and Asako. They are Fujo and Yaki.

JOBEI

Time to get up, bum.

He nudges Noritoshi with his sword. Noritoshi is awake.

CHIKAMATSU

You see, the princess wasn't lying.

JOBEI

All right, which one of you wants to die first.

The three thugs laugh as lights dim to blackout.

END OF ACT I

Act 2

ACT II

Action picks up where it left off.

Jobei motions for Noritoshi to put his long and short swords on the ground.

JOBEI

Yaki.

Yaki runs over and laughs sneeringly at Noritoshi as he picks up the swords.

(To Noritoshi)

Get down there.

Jobei and Noritoshi move center stage.

CHIKAMATSU

You two. I told you I never wanted to see both of you again.

YAKI

I never saw you before.

CHIKAMATSU

I see past your disguises, Niku, Yasai.

FUJO

What kind of stupid names are that? He's Yaki and I'm Fujo.

YAKI

Yeah, don't try to confuse us with all--

JOBEI

Oi, get over here.

Fujo and Yaki push Chikamatsu and Asako downstage.

FUJO

Sorry, boss, this guy thinks he knows us.

YAKI

But he's a complete stranger.

CHIKAMATSU

Liars!

JOBEI

Shut up before I slit your throat. Damn. I expected a fierce fight with a hundred swordsmen and instead I get you two.

CHIKAMATSU

We're not troublemakers, you can see that.

JOBEI

Yeah, you really disappointed me. Where's the old woman, Ino?

CHIKAMATSU

Oh, she sort of went crazy and disappeared.

JOBEI

What do you mean, disappeared?

CHIKAMATSU

She ran off that way in a puff of smoke. She was uncontrollable. I think she was an ogre.

JOBEI

Aeh, watch what you say. She reminded me of my sweet, aged mother.

CHIKAMATSU

Oh I see. You would be the kind Ino would give birth to.

JOBEI

Yeah, Ino and I got along great. Just as well, I would've hated to kill her.

(To Asako)

That's more than I can say about you. I hope you had fun making us chase you all over the forest. Natsukiya will make you suffer for it.

CHIKAMATSU

Look, maybe we can make some sort of arrangement.

JOBEI

What do you mean?

CHIKAMATSU

Well, you let the three of us go and you can have all the money I have here.

JOBEI

Where?

Chikamatsu takes out a small pouch. Yaki grabs it and takes out a coin and bites it. Jobei slaps him on the head and takes the pouch.

Yaki closes his mouth with the coin and acts innocent. Jobei waits a second, then squeezes Yaki's mouth, forcing him to open his mouth and drop the coin into the pouch.

No deal. You won't need this after we kill you.

CHIKAMATSU

You can kill him and me, but let the princess go.

NORITOSHI

Speak for yourself. I'm not sacrificing myself for no princess.

FUJO

Princess?

YAKI

What princess?

CHIKAMATSU

Show some respect to Princess Asako.

Yaki and Fujo roar with glee.

FUJO

Her name's Asako . . .

YAKI

. . . but she's no princess.

FUJO

She's no better than a whore.

YAKI

She is a whore.

CHIKAMATSU

Stop it!

JOBEI

So you said you were a princess. Natsukiya will laugh his guts out when he hears that.

CHIKAMATSU

Who is she?

JOBEI

Natsukiya's most prized prostitute.

CHIKAMATSU

Natsukiya's not a salt merchant?

JOBEI

Oh, he's a merchant all right. A merchant of female bodies of all types and sizes for any diversion and perversion. A straight business deal. Put your money down and take what you want. Except for Asako here. She's special. A high class clientele. You wonder why. What does she have? Exotic tricks? Wild animal of passion? Makes you curious, don't it? Yeah, when this one escaped, Natsukiya went out of his head. This will mean a nice bonus for me.

YAKI

What about these two?

JOBEI

We'll hold them till Natsukiya comes.

(To Noritoshi)

You look familiar. What's your name? You're an ugly son of a bitch. I'm going to be real happy when I chop you up.

Noritoshi spits at Jobei's feet. Jobei is ready to draw his sword.

CHIKAMATSU

Wait, wait, his name is Noritoshi, a common tramp. Don't waste your time with him.

JOBEI

(To Noritoshi)

A tramp? I don't see it in your eyes. Let's see how submissive you are. Get on your knees to me.

Noritoshi, sitting on the ground, doesn't move. Jobei circles him, then puts his foot on Noritoshi's back, forcing him to move to his knees.

You look natural in that position.

Slowly Jobei slides his foot to Noritoshi's neck and pushes his face to the ground.

Like that? That's how you should always be. Face to the ground at the feet of your superiors.

Laughing, Fujo puts his foot in Noritoshi's face.

FUJO

Smell this, tramp.

Noritoshi bites Fujo's foot. Fujo screams in pain and hops on one foot.

JOBEI

(To Fujo)

Asshole. You deserved what you got.

Yaki brings up Noritoshi and Fujo elbows him in the stomach, then knees him in the face. Fujo and Yaki drag Noritoshi to the tree.

CHIKAMATSU

Excuse me. But my name is Chikamatsu Monzaemon. You probably don't know me but--

JOBEI

Chikamatsu, the playwright?

CHIKAMATSU

Why yes. I'm surprised, well not really. Obviously you are a man of taste and learning.

JOBEI

I saw one of your plays in Osaka.

CHIKAMATSU

Really? How did you like it?

JOBEI

I hated it.

CHIKAMATSU

Wait a minute. Which one?

JOBEI

About the forty-seven warriors.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, yes, last year. Twelve days after the forty-seven were ordered to commit suicide, I had that play on stage. Amazing, eh. I wrote night and day to finish that one.

JOBEI

Wasn't very good.

CHIKAMATSU

It was a rush job. There's bound to be some weak spots here and there. I could've ironed them out, but the government officials forced me to close it down. It never got a fair chance to build an audience.

JOBEI

Yeah but you changed the names, the time, the place, what for?

CHIKAMATSU

Because of the authorities. Too sensitive a topic for the Shogun.

JOBEI

Poor excuse.

CHIKAMATSU

There should've been more than forty-seven warriors out of the whole clan. The other samurai turned their heads, ignored their fellow clansmen, forgot their lord and went on living. If they wanted to be masterless samurai, scraping by for a living, looking for meager work, well, too bad.

JOBEI

You got something against masterless samurai who have no clan to belong to?

CHIKAMATSU

Ah, did I say something wrong?

JOBEI

Who do you think you're looking at?

CHIKAMATSU

Wait, don't tell me, let me guess. A masterless samurai.

Jobei stands stiff and proud, legs apart, posing.

JOBEI

Matsudaira, Jobei, once samurai to Lord Fukunaga, now deceased.

CHIKAMATSU

As I was saying, some masterless samurai rise to great heights as . . . as . . . what exactly is your job now?

JOBEI

Chief henchman for Natsukiya, the most vicious, disgusting smut merchant in all of Japan.

CHIKAMATSU

There you see, Noritoshi, he has an important and . . . somewhat respectable job. I don't know how fairly Natsukiya treats his employees but--

NORITOSHI

Tell the truth, Chikamatsu. Tell him he's a foul-smelling, back-stabbing, thieving son of a whoring bitch.

JOBEI

You know, when the time comes, I'm going to feed your head to the crows.

CHIKAMATSU

Ah, Jobei. May I call you Jobei?

JOBEI

NO!!

CHIKAMATSU

Fine, fine, no problem, Matsudaira-san. You aren't any of those things he called you.

JOBEI

Thank you.

CHIKAMATSU

Why, just look at you. You're an extremely handsome man.

JOBEI

I know that.

CHIKAMATSU

You must have women coming at you from all directions.

JOBEI

I eat them and spit them out, like cherry pits.

CHIKAMATSU

A man of your good looks, why, you have the bearing of a hero.

YAKI

He is a hero--to guys like us.

FUJO

The cruelest swordsman I ever saw.

Fujo demonstrates clumsily with his short sword.

CHIKAMATSU

Ever thought of becoming an actor?

JOBEI

Who me?

CHIKAMATSU

Yes. You could be the Kabuki idol of Japan. Especially in the aragoto style of acting. You know, rough-house technique, like Ichikawa Danjuro. You've heard of Danjuro?

JOBEI

Of course, who hasn't. I saw him in Edo. The audience went crazy over him, crying out his name, throwing flowers in his path.

CHIKAMATSU

That's you! That's you! Can you see it? The crowd is on its feet for you, cheering, laughing, weeping. Matsudaira Jobei! Matsudaira Jobei!

Fujo and Yaki are cheering.

The greatest actor in the world! Watch. You come on, in roppo style. Like this.

Chikamatsu uses a strutting gait, arms swinging, very robust.

And I know just the play for you. "Kagemasa Ikazuchi Mondo." Thunder Samurai! I saw Danjuro do it two years ago. You'd be fan-tas-tic.

JOBEI

I have the looks, I know that. I can do whatever Danjuro can do.

CHIKAMATSU

Better. Even better. See, I write for puppets so I'm no help to you that way. But you could train under Danjuro. I could arrange an audition. You could study a few years and--

JOBEI

Why do I have to study? Why can't I just go on stage? I don't need any training.

CHIKAMATSU

Well, of course, if that's the way you feel. Maybe you could start off with the smaller roles and work your way up.

JOBEI

What for? I can go on stage and light up the whole theater. Why can't I be a star right now?

CHIKAMATSU

You do have that indefinable something.

NORITOSHI

Yeah, you have the intelligence of a worm that doesn't know its head from its ass.

CHIKAMATSU

Are you crazy? Stop making him mad.

NORITOSHI

Why don't you act in his puppet plays? He could use a dummy like you.

JOBEI

You just spoke your last words.

Jobei moves toward Noritoshi, hand on sword. Asako, who has been sitting on the ground, blocks his path.

ASAKO

Why waste your time on him? I'm here and you haven't even noticed.

JOBEI

I'm not blind.

ASAKO

I've been waiting all this time.

Asako stands and moves close to Jobei. Jobei, after a moment's hesitation, buries his face in her neck passionately.

FUJO

Don't let Natsukiya catch you doing that, boss.

Jobei grabs Fujo by the neck.

JOBEI

Who's going to tell him?

FUJO

N-o-o-t me-e-e.

YAKI

I didn't see you do what you did.

JOBEI

I do whatever I want. Never mind Natsukiya. Nobody stops me. Asako, do your famous dance.

ASAKO

Not here. Not in front of them.

JOBEI

Why not? You need an audience to do your specialty.

YAKI

Do the hot dance that makes your customers go wild.

FUJO

The dance that drives even women into a frenzy.

ASAKO

Let's go where we can be alone.

JOBEI

No, I want them to see you in action. Especially your friends.

Asako moves away.

How about your friends, eh? You want them to die? If you refuse, I'll kill them right now.

Chikamatsu inches forward.

CHIKAMATSU

Don't do it, he's only bluffing.

Jobei draws his sword and turns to Chikamatsu with a growl. Chikamatsu backsteps hurriedly.

JOBEI

Your highness, please do your dance . . . now.

Yaki grabs two sticks and beats out a pulsating rhythm. Jobei grabs Asako's obi, which begins to unravel. Asako twists and spins rhythmically until the obi is off, and her kimono is open in front. There is appropriate samisen music to go with this. Jobei pulls off the kimono, revealing Asako in a white, robe-like garment.

Slowly Asako begins her dance. She unties her hair and lets it fall to her shoulders. Her dance is erotic, building in passion until she collapses in exhaustion.

Jobei pulls her up and buries his face into her neck. Then he takes her upstage behind the boulder.

Noritoshi shows some emotion and makes a move toward them. Fujo stops him with his short sword.

FUJO

Aeh, stay back and let Jobei enjoy himself. Yaki, what's happening?

Yaki sneaks a peek behind the boulder. He moves excitedly.

YAKI

The spider embraces the butterfly-touching, teasing, tasting.

FUJO

Insects? I don't want insects! Tell me filth, give me dirt.

YAKI

All legs and arms locked in a web of passion.

FUJO

Useless monkey.

CHIKAMATSU

Oi, oi.

Chikamatsu beckons Fujo and Yaki to center stage.

Listen, you two. Get us out of this and I won't report you to the sensei.

YAKI

What sensei?

CHIKAMATSU

The sensei who sent you, of course.

Fujo goes downstage right, Yaki downstage left, pondering what Chikamatsu has said.

NORITOSHI

Chikamatsu, who are those guys?

CHIKAMATSU

They're the ones who were pestering me earlier tonight.

NORITOSHI

The ones I didn't see?

CHIKAMATSU

Yes.

NORITOSHI

What's wrong with you? Losing touch with reality? The only other persons we saw tonight were Ino and that stranger who didn't know his name. He was . . . he . . .

FUJO

(Coming back)

Don't try to confuse us.

YAKI

Yeah, it won't work 'cause we're already confused.

NORITOSHI

Chikamatsu, you're a writer. Figure out a solution to this.

CHIKAMATSU

You don't think I can, do you? Just for that, I won't put you in my next play.

By this time Jobei struts back to the others.

JOBEI

(To Noritoshi)

She was good. Real good.

(Laughs)

YAKI

Now my turn.

FUJO

Then me.

Jobei shoves both of them back.

JOBEI

Shut up! She's too good for diseased dogs like you.

FUJO

What're you going to do with her?

JOBEI

She won't run away. Not while I'm here. She wants me too much.

Fujo picks up the kimono and puts it over his shoulders. He wiggles over to Yaki.

FUJO

Yaki-san, my name is Asako. Want a piece of my body?

YAKI

How much is it going to cost me?

FUJO

Oh, it's free to you 'cause you're so handsome.

Fujo opens up the kimono, arms outstretched. Yaki leaps into Fujo's arms. They hop around making loud noises.

CHIKAMATSU

Will you two weasels be quiet!

Fujo stops and goes over to Chikamatsu.

FUJO

Who you calling a weasel?

Noritoshi grabs the kimono away. Fujo jumps away.

NORITOSHI

She needs her kimono. It's cold.

JOBEI

Cold? I warmed her up enough.

Noritoshi puts the kimono on Asako's shoulders.

ASAKO

Don't touch me.

JOBEI

See! After she's had the feel of a real man, she doesn't want a wet noodle like you touching her.

The three thugs laugh.

I'm hungry. Good sex always gives me an appetite. Fujo, get me something.

FUJO

Right, boss.

YAKI

Yeah, get the food out. Good sex always gives me an appetite.

The thugs go stage right to eat.

NORITOSHI

I'm sorry.

ASAKO

For what?

NORITOSHI

For what he did to you.

CHIKAMATSU

You saved Noritoshi's life by letting Jobei--

ASAKO

Don't mock me. Now you know what I am. Leave me alone.

CHIKAMATSU

But why did you do it? That's the question. I'm trying to figure you out.

ASAKO

I just didn't want to see a human being slaughtered for no reason, even a hopeless case like him.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, we two must be a pitiful sight, helpless to protect you. I hate it too. If it were up to me, if this were my story, I wouldn't have let Jobei touch you. But I have no control. Not enough to change the story.

NORITOSHI

That Jobei. I know who he reminds me of.

CHIKAMATSU

Who?

NORITOSHI

The stranger we met earlier.

CHIKAMATSU

Hmmm, I don't think so. A little around the eyes maybe. To me he looks like Sakata To juro.

NORITOSHI

Who's that?

CHIKAMATSU

A Kabuki actor, greatly admired for his ability to play courtesans.

(To Asako)

Forgive me.

NORITOSHI

That all you think about? Plays, actors, writing. Is everything a play to you? What about real life? Don't you care about that?

CHIKAMATSU

If I could, I would live in my plays. My own life is so drab. I prefer the make-believe world of my characters.

Take Asako, for example. I would love to live in her world. Her story would make a great play.

ASAKO

Don't do me any favors.

CHIKAMATSU

No, you don't understand. Here you are, a beautiful courtesan running away from an evil smut merchant. Pursued by a gang of thugs.

ASAKO

That's exactly what happened. You're already living in my story, and it's real.

CHIKAMATSU

Yes, you're right. Very strange. But in my story for you, a hero would come to the rescue.

ASAKO

What hero? You?

CHIKAMATSU

Oh no, not me. I'm a writer. I observe. I don't participate. Actually, I was thinking of Noritoshi here.

ASAKO

Your imagination just deserted you.

CHIKAMATSU

No, it could have happened.

NORITOSHI

You said yourself I wasn't the hero type.

CHIKAMATSU

I changed my mind. I know you better now.

ASAKO

I thought Ino was going to save me. Why did she have to be an ogre? Why couldn't she have been what she appeared to be--a kindly old woman who was going to take me to Nagasaki.

CHIKAMATSU

What's in Nagasaki?

ASAKO

People who would've given me shelter.

CHIKAMATSU

Tell me your story.

ASAKO

So you can write about me in your plays?

CHIKAMATSU

Why not? We may never get out of this alive anyway. Tell just a little.

ASAKO

My parents died in a hurricane when I was a baby. Miraculously I survived in a cluster of bamboo.

CHIKAMATSU

This is too good to be true. An infant bawling in an area of devastation. Life struggling to survive in a land of death. Who found you?

ASAKO

My father's sister. She tried to care for me, but she was very poor and had three children of her own. So she sold me to a woman who intended for me to become a geisha. But I grew up stubborn and rebellious and ran away often. Eventually Natsukiya came into my life.

CHIKAMATSU

I see it. In my mind's eye, it's very clear. I can see your life flash by. Yes, I could do something with that. Don't tell me anymore. Leave the rest to my imagination.

Chikamatsu turns away, deep in thought.

NORITOSHI

If we get out of this, I'll take you to Nagasaki.

ASAKO

Why should you?

NORITOSHI

Well, I won't if you don't want me to. But I have no place to go and I've never been to Nagasaki.

ASAKO

Living the life of a tramp makes your life easier, I guess.

NORITOSHI

No. A tramp can have a past that he can't forget. He can be haunted by memories as much as the shogun. A tramp's life is not a happy one.

Chikamatsu turns slowly to listen.

ASAKO

You know the worst about me. What about you?

NORITOSHI

It's hard for a man to admit his weaknesses.

ASAKO

Why? I hurt as much as any man. My shame is as deep as yours.

NORITOSHI

You couldn't help what happened to you. I knew what I was doing.

ASAKO

What did you do?

NORITOSHI

Actually my crime was that I did nothing. I let down my friends, my mentor. I threw away the values I had been taught.

CHIKAMATSU

Stay true to Buddhist principles, Noritoshi.

NORITOSHI

I don't need moralizing from a puppet writer.

CHIKAMATSU

A Buddhist priest would tell you the same thing. I should know. I was once a Buddhist priest myself.

NORITOSHI

Wait a second. You a priest?

CHIKAMATSU

At one time, yes. What's wrong with that?

NORITOSHI

What made you give it up?

CHIKAMATSU

It's a sad story. This woman--

NORITOSHI

Ah, when a woman's involved, it's always a sad story.

CHIKAMATSU

You don't want to hear?

NORITOSHI

Of course I do. Continue.

CHIKAMATSU

This beautiful woman was in love with me, a priest. She offered herself to me. I resisted the temptation, of course. But she was so heartbroken, she jumped off a bridge and browned in a river.

ASAKO

I feel so sorry for that woman. I know how she must've felt.

NORITOSHI

What bridge?

CHIKAMATSU

Who remembers.

NORITOSHI

What river?

CHIKAMATSU

Never mind. It's all in the past.

NORITOSHI

You making this up?

CHIKAMATSU

The really tragic part was that I loved her too, but I didn't tell her. So she died without knowing the truth.

ASAKO

How sad.

Jobei stands and stretches.

JOBEI

Aeh, Chikamatsu, what about some entertainment before Natsukiya comes?

CHIKAMATSU

I'm sorry. I'm not a performer.

JOBEI

You're a writer, tell a story.

CHIKAMATSU

A story? Well, I have lots of stories, what kind of story? Lovers' suicide, commoners' revenge?

JOBEI

A story about samurai.

CHIKAMATSU

Fictional? Historical?

JOBEI

Historical.

CHIKAMATSU

All right. But I'll need some help. You know the story, Jobei, the forty-seven warriors.

JOBEI

No, no, another one.

CHIKAMATSU

But this has a twist. Trust me.

Wooden clappers, as in a Kabuki play, begin sounding, slowly then more rapidly, to signal the start of a show. Chikamatsu, Fujo, Yaki, Asako and Noritoshi prepare to act as puppets. The wooden clappers make one last resounding bang to start the puppet show.

Chikamatsu, as narrator and voice of all the puppets, sits over at stage right. He faces the audience throughout. A samisen is used in this portion for emotional and dramatic effect.

CHIKAMATSU

Tonight we present the story of the forty-seven warriors, who chose death over life in order to avenge the wrongful death of their beloved Lord Asano of Ako province. Chusingura!

Chikamatsu throws glitter (confetti) in the air as if to signal a magical act. Lights dim to spotlight puppets.

Imagine yourself in the Takemoto Theater, where puppets act out the life of humans. Once there was a young, idealistic samurai in the Asano clan who was kind to peasants and disliked the bullying tactics of his fellow samurai.

Noritoshi moves like a puppet to indicate he is the young samurai.

He was a disciple of Horibe Yasubei, one of the famous leaders of the Asano clan. When news reached the clan that Lord Asano had attacked Lord Kira in the Shogun's castle, the leaders of the clan were horrified and fearful of the consequences. Lord Kira, who had belittled and scorned Lord Asano beyond all human reason, escaped punishment. But Lord Asano was ordered to commit suicide.

CHIKAMATSU

(CONT˙)

The Asano clan was disbanded. The samurai in the clan became masterless. But they vowed vengeance on Lord Kira.

Here Asako moves as a puppet. Noritoshi goes to her and they do a little love dance, puppet style.

Our young samurai went to Edo to work for a rice merchant. And he fell in love with the merchant's daughter. Can romantic love dissolve revenge in one's heart? It was an interlude of gentle rain, soft breezes and caressing voices.

Asako leaves Noritoshi. Fujo comes on as the woman's father.

The woman's father was a decent man who cared for his daughter's happiness.

(Father)

You can't have a happy life married to a former Asano warrior. The word is they've made a death pact to get the head of Lord Kira.

(Daughter)

Yoshinaga-san says he intends to be a merchant and forget his samurai code. I believe him.

(Father)

How can you win? If the Asano warriors go after Lord Kira, then Yoshinaga will be shamed for not joining in.

(Daughter)

He says the clan will never seek revenge.

(Father)

Why not?

(Daughter)

Because it is morally wrong.

(Father)

What is he, a fool? It's the samurai's way to right a wrong.

Noritoshi enters.

(Yoshinaga)

Killing Lord Kira won't solve the problem. Revenge is wrong.

(Father)

What kind of nonsense is this? You, a samurai, talking like a coward.

(Yoshinaga)

I've learned a new way of thinking.

(Father)

Who fed you these ideas? Some monkey in a tree? I thought my daughter was in love with a samurai.

(Yoshinaga)

What good is a samurai without a master? I thought you understood. That's why you hired me to work in your rice shop.

(Father)

Yes, I hired you. But I thought you knew that I did it to help you until the time came for you to seek vengeance. I thought that I, a commoner, in my own small way, was helping the loyal Asano samurai.

(Daughter)

Don't listen to father. I don't care about Lord Kira and what he did. Our love is more important than hatred or revenge.

(As himself)

Then one day Horibe. Yasubei came.

Yaki stomps on from stage right as a puppet.

(Horibe)

Oi, Yoshinaga, the day is coming. Settle your affairs now.

Noritoshi joins Yaki.

(Yoshinaga)

Horibe sensei, I can't go.

(Horibe)

What's wrong?

(Yoshinaga)

We shouldn't kill to avenge Lord Asano's death.

(Horibe)

Are you crazy?

(Yoshinaga)

Innocent people will die for nothing.

(Horibe)

For nothing? You are a samurai of Ako province. Defend the name of Lord Asano.

(Yoshinaga)

I'm sorry, but my mind has changed from those days.

(Horibe)

Don't shame me this way. What is it? Love for a woman? Fool! No love is stronger than your own integrity.

(Yoshinaga)

Our love is. She's a woman of high ideals, a woman who believes that our love will survive all abuses.

(Horibe)

A samurai puts duty and honor before romantic love. When you betray that code, you destroy your own life. If you ever see me coming yourway, turn around and never let me see your face again.

Yaki stomps off right.

(As himself)

And so the forty-seven went on the vendetta, attacking Lord Kira's stronghold and killing many of his men. They found Lord Kira, announced their mission and executed him. When the Shogun's men arrived, the forty-seven surrendered peaceably. Later they were allowed to commit suicide. They were buried at [...]Sengaku[...]. Temple near their Lord Asano. All Japan swelled with pride to see the samurai perform a deed of glory once more. But some were unhappy.

(Father)

Yoshinaga, I'm letting you go. You're bad for business. People talk. They pity my daughter for being in love with a coward. They take their business elsewhere so they don't have to deal with you.

(Yoshinaga)

I understand.

(Father)

Why didn't you go and fight and die with the others? Then at least my daughter can hold her head up high.

(Daughter)

Yes, it's best you leave. We could never be happy together. I was willing to commit suicide with you, but you said no. You even deprive me of that way out.

(Yoshinaga)

Suicide isn't the answer.

(Daughter)

Please don't treat me like a child. If you don't love me enough to die with me, then go away. See if your life will be better elsewhere. I don't care, I don't care, I don't care.

(Yoshinaga)

I'm sorry. I see I've hurt you both. That wasn't my intention. I had hoped to live a decent and useful life but . . . I'll go.

(As himself)

So Yoshinaga left Edo, racked with doubt, self-guilt and shame. He stumbled around Japan, getting drunk, abusive, hiding behind the mask of insolence.

(Pause)

The end.

Lights come up to evening lighting.

JOBEI

Hold it, hold it, what do you mean, the end. What happened to Yoshinaga? Did he die?

CHIKAMATSU

No, he's still alive.

JOBEI

What a coward he was. Tell me his full name.

CHIKAMATSU

Yoshinaga Noritoshi.

JOBEI

Noritoshi? Wait, tell me the truth? Is he the one?

CHIKAMATSU

Why don't you ask him?

JOBEI

Well?

NORITOSHI

Figure it out for yourself, idiot.

JOBEI

Yeah, yeah, you're him. It has to be. I should've killed you the minute I saw you.

NORITOSHI

How did you know?

CHIKAMATSU

A wild guess. You're more famous than you think. The man who gave up the vendetta for love of a woman.

JOBEI

I can't believe you were so stupid. A woman. You sacrificed your honor for love and what did it get you? I would've given my life to be a part of the forty-seven. A glorious way to die. And you, you disgrace the samurai.

NORITOSHI

Look at yourself, Jobei. You used to be a samurai for Lord Fukunaga. How proud are you now?

JOBEI

Don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing. Someday I'll get a chance to join up with another clan.

NORITOSHI

Too late. You're better off dead.

JOBEI

Yeah? And who's going to kill me? You?

There is the sound of a distant bell ringing.

FUJO

It's Natsukiya. He's coming.

JOBEI

You two go get him.

Yaki and Fujo race offstage right on the hanamichi.

NORITOSHI

Fight me now, Jobei. A duel to the death. We can settle this before Natsukiya comes.

JOBEI

You think I'm stupid. So I kill you, what do I get out of it?

NORITOSHI

The satisfaction of knowing you killed a superior swordsman.

JOBEI

You superior? Yeah, a superior coward. I don't believe you gave up everything for love. You were afraid to join the forty-seven because you didn't want to die. Love had nothing to do with it. What do you think, Chikamatsu?

CHIKAMATSU

He may have been so much in love that he didn't want to die.

JOBEI

No, no, you said so yourself. Lovers' suicide. True lovers would want to die together.

CHIKAMATSU

I don't know. Sometimes I think it's foolish myself. But it's a popular belief. People want to believe that love is that strong. As for Noritoshi, only he knows whether he truly loved that woman, or just used the facade of love to avoid joining the forty-seven.

JOBEI

Oh, he knew what he was doing. His love was only a sham.

ASAKO

No. It was real. Noritoshi, you were in love. Believe that.

JOBEI

Quiet.

NORITOSHI

I don't know the answer; do you, Chikamatsu?

JOBEI

Yeah, tell us the truth, you decide.

CHIKAMATSU

Me? Why does everyone ask me? Who am I, I'm only a writer of puppet plays.

NORITOSHI

But you know me. Tell me my true feelings.

CHIKAMATSU

Hmmm, you put me in a difficult position. Let me see. Love is an illusion that knows no reason. Love confines you in a smothering atmosphere of inertia. Love knows no mercy. Death, on the other hand, is reality. Death makes you sleep and frees your anxieties from the grasp of illusion. Death has compassion. Love complicates. Death simplifies. In your case, I agree with Asako. I think you were really in love, but now you prefer death over love.

JOBEI

I'll put you out of your misery soon enough. Don't forget to thank me before you die.

There is a bellow at the hanamichi entrance. Fujo and Yaki come stumbling onto the hanamichi. Tripping over each other, they scurry over to Jobei.

JOBEI

(CONT˙)

What's wrong? Wild animal chasing you?

FUJO

Worse. It's Natsukiya. He's mad.

YAKI

Never saw him in an uglier mood.

FUJO

His veins are bulging out of his face.

YAKI

He doesn't even look like himself.

Natsukiya hops onto the hanamichi with a roar. His face is decorated in the aragoto style of Kabuki, looking fierce with large blue lines blazing on his face. He wears high getas (wooden slippers).

NATSUKIYA

My name is Natsukiya Monobei. Make way for my anger. Bow before my feet and cry for mercy.

Natsukiya stomps down the hanamichi to face the others.

So, Asako, I have you back. I've been anxious for this moment.

(To Jobei)

Why are these two still alive?

JOBEI

I thought you wanted to talk to them first.

NATSUKIYA

I've talked to them enough. Kill them and bring me their hearts.

CHIKAMATSU

Wait, please, Natsukiya-san.

NATSUKIYA

Yes, Chikamatsu?

CHIKAMATSU

You know me?

NATSUKIYA

We've met before.

CHIKAMATSU

We have? That's funny. I don't remember you. You have extraordinary features. Such a face. I'm sure I wouldn't have forgotten someone like you.

NATSUKIYA

Doesn't matter. We won't be seeing each other much longer.

CHIKAMATSU

Well, that's what I was going to ask you about. Noritoshi here and I pledge not to say a word about this whole wretched affair if you let us go now. And I'm sure you won't want Asako anymore after what happened to her. So we'll take her with us, if you don't mind.

NATSUKIYA

What happened to Asako?

CHIKAMATSU

Oh I'm sorry, I didn't think. I shouldn't have said--

NATSUKIYA

WHAT HAPPENED TO ASAKO? SOMEBODY SAY SOMETHING BEFORE I KILL YOU ALL!!!

Fujo hurries to Natsukiya and whispers in his ear.

WHAT!!!

FUJO

Jobei didn't really mean to do it.

YAKI

Lust got the better of him. The lower half of him.

FUJO

He was pumping like mad.

YAKI

We couldn't stop him.

NATSUKIYA

BBBBAAAAA-KKKKKKAAAAAAA!!!!!! Jobei, you've never shown me proper respect. Is it beneath you to obey a merchant like me.

JOBEI

You pay me for my loyalty.

NATSUKIYA

And you serve me by abusing my property. You know how I feel about Asako.

JOBEI

She's only a woman. What can she be worth to a great man like you?

NATSUKIYA

Trying to save your neck, eh. A poor, hopeless samurai like you. I give you a job and food. Without me you'd be a pitiful beggar in the streets. A snail waiting to be crushed under my feet. You worthless samurai. What do you say, Chikamatsu? The samurai will become an extinct species, right?

CHIKAMATSU

Perhaps. Hard to say.

NATSUKIYA

We don't need samurai and their decaying life style. Asako, I apologize for Jobei's rude behavior. He'll be punished, believe me.

ASAKO

I don't care. He means nothing to me.

NATSUKIYA

Did he hurt you? Too embarrassed to answer?

Natsukiya tries to open up the front of her garment. Asako turns to face upstage.

I must see if Jobei damaged you in any way. You understand, don't you, Asako?

Natsukiya stands on an upstage riser and turns to face Asako.

Fujo, Yaki.

Fujo and Yaki pull open the kimono and hold it out wide. Natsukiya leers, his mouth opens, exposing his red teeth.

Yes, how exquisite you are. Your beauty overwhelms me. I must have you now. I will give you such pain and pleasure that you will scream for Death to take you quickly.

Natsukiya moves toward Asako.

NORITOSHI

Natsukiya! Come here so I can spit in your face.

NATSUKIYA

So the ragged samurai speaks. You think you distract me from Asako. So you save her from my lust for a few minutes, no matter. She'll keep well. You don't deserve a simple death.

NORITOSHI

Fight me then.

NATSUKIYA

Give me more intelligence than that. I pay men to do my fighting. Jobei, give him his sword. Fight him here. Give him a second chance to redeem himself.

JOBEI

Why waste energy over a bum like him?

NATSUKIYA

Jobei, prove to me you're as good as you say you are. Fujo and Yaki will help you. Three against one. What chance does he have?

CHIKAMATSU

Wait. Fujo and Yaki belong to me. I want to fight them.

Natsukiya roars with laughter.

NORITOSHI

Don't be a fool, Chikamatsu.

CHIKAMATSU

I know what I'm doing. I want those two out of my life forever, and I guess I'll have to kill them.

NATSUKIYA

Good, good. A preliminary match. Fujo, a sword for our playwright.

Fujo sneers at Chikamatsu as he hands over a long sword.

CHIKAMATSU

I didn't mention this before, Noritoshi, but I once worked as a retainer for a samurai family, but I had to leave. So I know how you feel.

NORITOSHI

So you have a samurai background too. Is there anything you haven't been in your life?

CHIKAMATSU

One or two things. I'll get to them sooner or later.

NATSUKIYA

Go ahead, Fujo, Yaki. Attack. Take off his head with the first cut.

Fujo and Yaki jerk off the tops of their kimonos and reveal crude tattoos on their bodies. They flex their muscles, act macho, draw their swords and make menacing gestures toward Chikamatsu, who doesn't move.

Fujo and Yaki now sally forth against Chikamatsu, stop three-quarters of the way and return to their original spot, laughing, jeering, sneering, having a good time. They charge a second time and return in the same manner.

NORITOSHI

Be careful, Chikamatsu.

CHIKAMATSU

Thanks for the advice. I don't know what I would do without you.

Fujo and Yaki charge again. This time Chikamatsu draws his sword and with a loud kiai (yell) flashes his sword against the duo. Fujo and Yaki scream in fright and jump off the upstage riser. Chikamatsu shows a disciplined sword kata (form).

NATSUKIYA

Excellent, Chikamatsu. You've put your demons to rest. It was brilliant of you.

CHIKAMATSU

It was time after all these years of torment.

NATSUKIYA

Now, Jobei, you have Noritoshi all to yourself.

Jobei brings out his sword. Chikamatsu gives his sword to Noritoshi.

Attack him.

Taiko drums beat. Jobei and Noritoshi circle each other warily. Noritoshi is disciplined and firm. Jobei is more excitable. Drums beat louder and more rapidly. Noritoshi freezes into a firm stance. Jobei raises his sword high over his head preparing to attack.

Jobei lets out a loud kiai. Drums instantly stop. There is a long pause with Jobei in a pose sword high above his head. Noritoshi poised and ready.

JOBEI

I quit.

NATSUKIYA

So you're afraid.

JOBEI

You don't pay me enough to risk my life this way. Noritoshi, don't think I'm scared of you. Maybe we'll have our duel in the future. Look me up in Edo.

Natsukiya flashes his dagger in the air and stabs Jobei in the back.

NATSUKIYA

(To Noritoshi)

You would've killed him anyway. He knew it too, that's why he backed off.

Jobei falls off upstage riser. Natsukiya turns his back to the audience and begins doffing his outer layer of clothing.

CHIKAMATSU

You are a ruthless man, Natsukiya. Hell is the perfect place for you.

Natsukiya screams and laughs hysterically. The laugh turns into a piercing, devilish scream.

NORITOSHI

So it's you against me . . . Ino.

Ino turns. His face now has red streaks across the eye brows and on the cheeks.

INO

You know me too well.

CHIKAMATSU

What happened to Natsukiya?

INO

He's no longer among the living. But his heart lives within me.

CHIKAMATSU

What do you mean?

INO

I ripped his heart out of his depraved body and devoured it. A big, fat, greasy, black heart. A delicacy. And now for some unfinished business. First I kill you two, then I take my sweet Asako with me.

CHIKAMATSU

We know what you are. The question is why you want Asako so much.

INO

You haven't told them?

ASAKO

I left it for you to say.

INO

Tell them before they die.

ASAKO

There's one other secret I kept from you.

Asako takes out a cross from inside her kimono.

CHIKAMATSU

I know that. It's a Christian cross. I see. Persecuted for their beliefs.

INO

Baptized into a religion of foreigners. Now come and get me, Noritoshi, see what you can do.

Samisen music starts slowly, then builds with action. There is also beating of taiko drums. Ino leaps about the stage. At one point Ino and Noritoshi come together, swords locked against each other.

As the battle rages, Ino throws out a web of blue string that tangles up Noritoshi. Ino hurls another web, and Noritoshi struggles in desperation, growing gradually weaker.

Chikamatsu runs over and throws glitter in the air over Ino. The effect is immediate. Ino emits a terrifying scream and loses control of the webs. At the scream, Chikamatsu runs behind the tree.

Asako picks up a sword and slashes Ino across the back. Ino screams. Drums pound. Noritoshi is up now and slashes Ino across the front. Another wrenching cry.

Ino races upstage and steps into fire pit. Red light streaks up from below. Smoke billows out. Ino rages and struggles; cries of other ogres explode in sympathy. Hellish sounds fill the theater. Noritoshi gathers his strength for one last attack, making a grand swoop of his sword across Ino's body.

Ino cries out, sinking deeper into the pit. Other voices of ogres weep, wail; Ino is waist-high in the pit, then up to his neck. Eventually his head disappears. Voices of ogres fade, crying, dying. Only Ino's hand can be seen now, but it soon is gone into oblivion.

When Ino disappears, the red light in the pit goes out. All is quiet. There is only blackness in the pit now.

Chikamatsu looks into the pit.

CHIKAMATSU

I think that's the last of Ino.

NORITOSHI

You did well. It took three of us to destroy Ino.

CHIKAMATSU

Asako, you were wonderful.

NORITOSHI

Thank you, Asako, you were very brave.

ASAKO

I had to do something.

NORITOSHI

If you'll let me, I still want to take you to Nagasaki.

ASAKO

Even if you know now that I'm a Christian?

NORITOSHI

It doesn't matter. You should be with your friends.

CHIKAMATSU

You know, if this were my play, I wouldn't end it this way.

NORITOSHI

Why?

CHIKAMATSU

Because this is a happy ending. Very un-Japanese. In one of my plays, you Noritoshi would get killed just as

you killed Ino. And Asako, out of sadness and love, would kill herself. Osaka audiences aren't happy unless there is a love suicide or a heroic death-sacrifice.

NORITOSHI

Sorry to disappoint you.

CHIKAMATSU

Don't worry. There are many other stories to tell. One less won't hurt.

ASAKO

Noritoshi, what will you do when you get to Nagasaki?

NORITOSHI

Go fishing.

CHIKAMATSU

Noritoshi, you got a second chance. Make the most of it. Be useful and dedicated.

NORITOSHI

If you say so, Chikamatsu. What're you doing?

Chikamatsu is tying on his back a basket with the puppet head showing.

CHIKAMATSU

I'm leaving this forest before something else happens. You two stay and rest. I'm off to Osaka where I'm needed.

NORITOSHI

I'll miss you, Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

ASAKO

Goodbye. Take care. And thank you.

CHIKAMATSU

We'll meet again, I hope. Come see one of my plays in Osaka. Be happy. Live a long life.

All three bow politely. Chikamatsu begins his walk on the hanamichi. Lights dim on Asako, who sits, and Noritoshi, who stands behind her.

Well, my little friend, we're alone again. Just as well. Back to our own world, eh.

Glitter flutters down in the air above Chikamatsu. He looks up. A transformation from human to puppet begins. Chikamatsu is becoming a puppet before our eyes.

My name is Chikamatsu Monzaemon. I write plays. I live in the theater of reality and illusion.

Wooden clappers resound with his puppet-like movements as he exits on the hanamichi. The clappers finish with one loud bang.

Lights out.

THE END

(END OF PLAY)